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House crime panel launches probe Contra-coke tie eyed

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WASHINGTON — The House crime subcommittee headed by Rep. William Hughes (D-N.J.) has quietly launched an investigation into allegations that a Contra gunrunning operation linked to Lt. Col. Oliver North was partly financed by cocaine smuggled into the United States, the Daily News learned yesterday.

Hayden Gregory, the subcommittee counsel who has just returned from conducting interviews in Miami, declined comment.

Attorney General Edwin Meese had previously revealed that North masterminded the secret diversion of millions of dollars of Iranian arms money into the Contra gunrunning operation. But Meese stalled an FBI probe in Miami last October into Contra arms smuggling and drug trafficking at the request of North's boss, Vice Adm. John Poindexter.

The House subcommittee is focusing on allegations made by a Washington public interest law firm, Christic Institute, in a federal court suit in Miami.

Daniel Sheehan, Christic counsel, in a court affidavit, said he has the names of six civilian pilots who claim they flew guns, ammunition and C-4 explosives from the United States to the Costa Rican ranch of John Hull, an American citrus farmer.

The pilots then ferried cocaine back to the U.S.,

through Miami and Memphis, and claim the money was used to finance Contra operations.

Sheehan has refused to release the names of the pilots, saying they insist upon immunity from prosecution before testifying.

Hull, now a naturalized Costan Rican, was described by reporters in Costa Rica last year as having CIA ties and as having participated

in a plot to kill dissident Contra leader Eden Pastora. He filed a libel suit in Costa Rica against the reporters, Martha Honey and Tony Avirgan, but lost.

North aide named

A jailed arms smuggler, Peter Glibbery, also has told newsmen that he watched with Robert Owen, North's liaison to the Contras, as arms shipments arrived at Hull's ranch.

The Christic suit, naming Owen as one of the defendants, said that starting in September 1983, Hull's ranch was used as a transshipment point to smuggle a ton of Colombian cocaine into the U.S. each week.

The suit contends that Owen "has used or invested income received from the pattern of racketeering activity" to establish a

Washington PR firm, Idea Inc. Leonard Greenbaum, Owen's lawyer, has declined comment.

Sheehan said that he has talked to three Drug Enforcement Administration agents who contend that the private Contra aid network was linked to big-time Colombian drug dealer Pablo Escobar.

No hard evidence

DEA officials in Washington have repeatedly contended that they have no hard evidence of Contra involvement in drug trafficking.

House crime subcommittee investigators also have interviewed a jailed arms smuggler, Jesus Garcia, who says he was an operative in Contra arms smuggling. Garcia, a former Dade County (Miami) deputy sheriff, has claimed it was "common knowledge" that cocaine was financing the Contra operation. He said that he saw cocaine and weapons stored under the same roof.

Sheehan said that he also had eyewitness testimony from a man identified only as "David," a Nicaraguan now believed to be dead, who said he was part of an "international brigade," based on Hull's ranch in 1985.

David said that the brigade was "directly involved" in transshipment of large quantities of Colombian cocaine from Hull's ranch to the U.S.

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